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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3818
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RUEHWR/AMEMBASSY WARSAW 3203
RUEHKV/AMEMBASSY KIEV 3135
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 3326
RUEHRA/AMEMBASSY RIGA 1559
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 0878
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SUBJECT: State Media Focuses only on Lukashenko

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) monitored Belarusian media coverage of the March presidential elections from 28 January to 10 February. BAJ found that state media focused almost exclusively on Lukashenko, portraying him in a positive light. For the most part, state media referred to the opposition as a non-personified body, although it gave some negative coverage to opposition candidate Milinkevich. Independent newspapers devoted some space to all candidates, but they lack the reach of state media. End summary.

Electronic Media

¶2. (SBU) During this period state television launched three special programs: a series of pro-Lukashenko rock concerts called "For Belarus," and the anti-Western and anti-opposition "documentaries" "Agent 590" and "Spiritual War". During this period news on state-owned channel Belarus Television (BT) devoted 43% of its coverage to Lukashenko, 0.2% to Milinkevich, and 0.02% to Kozulin and Gaidukevich. Of the 98 stories on Lukashenko, 88 were positive and 10 neutral in tone. The stories on Kozulin and Gaidukevich were neutral, while those on Milinkevich were neutral or negative. Per episode, state TV channel ONT averaged 30 minutes of coverage of Lukashenko, 15 seconds to Gaidukevich, and 10 seconds each to Milinkevich and Kozulin. State radio news had essentially the same proportion. There is no nationwide independent electronic media.

Print Media

¶3. (SBU) State newspapers Sovetskaya Belarussia (SB) and Zvyazda devoted 0.7% of their reporting to negative articles on Milinkevich, and did not mention Kozulin or Gaidukevich at all. Zvyazda devoted 76.3% of its coverage to positive stories about Lukashenko, while SB gave him a similar amount of space. The editor-in-chief of SB, Pavel Yakubovich, wrote on 7 February, "I cannot get rid of the feeling that, despite his respectable exterior, Milinkevich is a dangerous man." Independent papers covered all candidates: Narodnaya Volya (NV) gave 20.3% of its coverage to Lukashenko, 8.77% to Kozulin, and 6% to Milinkevich; Komsomolskaya Pravda (KP) devoted 30.7% to Milinkevich, 23.4% Lukashenko, 14.4% Kozulin, and 7% Gaidukevich; Nasha Niva (NN) gave 49.08% to Milinkevich, 24.97% to Kozulin, 24.79% to Lukashenko, and 0.26% to Gaidukevich. NV and NN gave Milinkevich and Kozulin positive coverage, and Lukashenko negative, while KP gave Milinkevich and Lukashenko positive coverage, and the rest neutral.

Comment

¶4. (SBU) This divide in coverage between state and independent media is no surprise. However, after years of government pressure

independent media reaches only a fraction of the audience than does state media. There is no notable independent television or FM/AM radio in Belarus, and state newspapers have ten times the circulation of the independents. Given this imbalance, and the regime's use of state media to support Lukashenko and largely ignore the rest of the candidates, it is difficult to see how any elections conducted in this media environment could be considered fair. KROL